

Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for
and Response to Hurricane Katrina
October 19th, 2005

Good morning, and welcome to the Select Committee's third hearing on the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina.

On September 15, before this Select Committee was established by a bipartisan House vote, the Government Reform Committee held a hearing on the early lessons learned from Katrina. At that hearing, the Committee's Ranking Member, Henry Waxman, said there were "two steps we should take right away."

First, he said, we should request basic documents from the agencies. And second, he said – and I quote – "we need to hear from Michael Brown and Michael Chertoff. These are the two government officials most responsible for the inadequate response, and the Committee should call them to testify without delay."

I'm happy to report that we haven't delayed. We've met and exceeded these goals. We're doing the oversight we're charged with doing. While many who so urgently called on Congress to swiftly investigate have refused to participate and instead tilt at windmills, we're investigating aggressively what went wrong and what went right.

And we – those on my side of the aisle, and those Democrats who agree we need to ask tough questions, together -- are doing it by the book, letting the chips fall where they may. I will continue to invite Democrats to join us. I will continue to give them full and equal opportunity to make statements and question witnesses and help guide the direction of our inquiry.

But regardless of who does and does not show up for our hearings, we have a job to do, and I'm intent on doing it right.

Our goal today is to understand the Department of Homeland Security's role and responsibilities before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama on August 29, 2005.

I want to thank DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff for being here today so we can discuss the specific actions he took right before, during, and after the storm. His insight and perspective will be critical as we construct the narrative that will serve as the foundation of our final report.

Although the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Michael Brown have received the most attention from Members of Congress, state and local officials, and the news media in Katrina's wake, DHS and Secretary Chertoff have primary responsibility for managing the national response to a catastrophic disaster, according to the National Response Plan.

Three weeks ago we heard from Michael Brown. Today we'll hear from his boss, the man who ultimately fired him.

We need to find out if Michael Brown had it right when he testified before our committee. Has FEMA been under-funded and under-staffed? Has it become 'emaciated'? Did Congress undermine FEMA's effectiveness when we folded it into DHS?

Michael Brown testified that he asked the Department for funding to implement the lessons learned from the Hurricane Pam exercise and that those funds were denied. He also testified about brain drain, diminished financial resources, and "assessments" of \$70 to \$80 million by DHS for DHS-wide programs. He said he wrote memos to Secretary Ridge and Secretary Chertoff regarding the inadequacy of FEMA's resources. We will ask the Secretary about these assertions.

And regardless of his response, we are left with the question of whether any of this affected the government's preparation for and response to Katrina.

We also need to establish the Department's role and responsibilities in a disaster. What resources can the Secretary bring to bear? What triggers the decision to deploy those resources? During Katrina, how personally involved was Secretary Chertoff in seeking, authorizing, or deploying specific resources?

Michael Brown testified that he had "no problem picking up the phone and getting hold of [Secretary] Chertoff..." How many times during these difficult days did he make those calls? What did he ask for? What did he get?

Michael Brown also testified that he wished he'd called in the military sooner. Did that require Secretary Chertoff's involvement? Did Mr. Brown ask the Secretary to seek military support? If so, when?

Over the past several weeks, we've all boned up on the disaster declaration process outlined in the Stafford Act. We understand the goals, structure and mechanisms of the National Response Plan. We've learned the alphabet soup of "coordinating elements" established by the Plan: the HSOC ("H-Sock") and RRCC; JFOs and PFOs; the IIMG.

Now it's our job to find out how this soup was served.

At the end of the day, we'll tell a story about the National Response Plan, and how its 15 Emergency Support Functions were implemented with Katrina. We'll see how well the ESFs were followed. Where there were problems, we'll ask why. Where even flawless execution led to unacceptable results, we'll have to return to questioning the underlying Plan.

The American people don't care about acronyms or organizational charts. They want to know who was supposed to do what, when, and whether the job got done. And if it didn't get done, they want to know how we are going to make sure it does the next time.

Americans know by now that there was no shortage of plans, no shortage of exercises. They know just as well that there was a profound failure to be proactive, a deep inability to execute. They understand this was a big, big storm. But they also understand that too many people viewed preparation and response as "someone else's problem."

Under the National Response Plan, the DHS Secretary is the federal official charged with declaring an Incident of National Significance. Part of that declaration is naming a Principal Federal Official, or PFO, to manage the response.

We only received a handful of the e-mails we requested to and from Mike Brown in time to prepare for this hearing. We were disappointed, to say the least, that a congressionally mandated committee, with subpoena power, has had to wait this long on a seemingly simple request. The bulk of the documents we requested did not arrive until late last night. It's this sort of inadequate responsiveness to requests for information that has long frustrated many of our Members, and perhaps sheds some light on the Department's woeful response to Katrina.

But, from the handful of Mike Brown's emails we did received in a timely manner, we know that he *resented* being named the PFO by the Secretary. What does the Secretary have to say about that? What does this say about the underlying Plan?

Finally, we hope today to ask Secretary Chertoff what we're asking all officials as part of our investigation. Where were you in the days and hours right before, during, and after the hurricane? What were you doing? Who were you talking to? Establishing this timeline will be a key part of the story we end up telling in our report.

Based on the information we have gathered so far – and we have much, much more to gather – it seems that all too often, local, state, and federal leaders were *planning* in a crisis environment. A lot of decisions that seemingly should have been made days or months or years before were being made on the fly, or not made at all.

That's just not good government.

NYU Professor Paul Light wrote recently that "Mr. Chertoff is just about the only official in Washington who can say 'I told you so' about FEMA," based on some of the reforms he outlined last July in his Second Stage Review. I wonder if Secretary Chertoff believes FEMA's response to Katrina would have been better if the reforms had been in place on August 29th.

Interviewed by CNN on September 21st, Secretary Chertoff said it is his “responsibility to fix the things that don’t work well. That’s what we are in the process of doing right now.” Today we hope to hear his thoughts on exactly what didn’t work well with Katrina, and how the Department’s process of self-examination is proceeding.